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The Impact of Constructivism on International Relations Theory: A History

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Abstract

Although the impact of ‘constructivism’ on international relations is undeniable, there is by no means a consensus over what the nature and extent of this impact has been, nor what ‘constructivism’ really constitutes. This article outlines the historical development, positioning constructivism within the tradition of historiography by reference to paradigm-shifts that is pervasive in international relations. In doing so, the aim is provide a counterweight to the disciplinary tendency towards pedagogically-driven over-simplicity, and provide a nuanced account of the history and contemporary impact of constructivist disciplinary contribution, and contemporary relevance.

1. Introduction: Different Constructivisms

Constructivist concepts have profoundly impacted International Relations (e.g. Viotti & Kaupi, p.277; Smith 2005, p.89-90; Sutch & Elias 2007), yet precise identification of ‘key tenets’ proves problematic (Zehfuss 2002, p.2.) There has long been self-consciousness within the discipline of historiographical “great debates,” Kuhnian paradigm-shifts (Kuhn, 1970), and conglomeration of academic variance (e.g. Schmidt 2002, p.3; Wilson 1998, p.1-3.) Notwithstanding the inherent dangers therein (see e.g. Wilson 1998, p.8; Carvalho, Leira, & Hobson, 2011, p.756), extrapolation of central constructivist themes is undertaken here. Initially, the most complete attempt at a constructivist theory, seen in the work of Wendt (esp. Wendt,

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1992; 1999) is examined. Subsequently, while claims that the discipline of International Relations has been subject to a 'constructivist turn' (e.g. Checkel, 1998) underscore the perceived level of impact, and claims that the engagement of constructivist scholars with the 'rationalist' school constitute the latest 'great debate' within International Relations indicate the status afforded to the constructivist agenda (Price & Reus-Smidt 1998, p.263; Ruggie 1998, p.4; Zehfuss 2002, p.2), the diffuse applications of constructivism, and conceptions of constructivism as engaging in debate with rationalism to different extents (Zehfuss 2002, p.2; Jackson & Sorenson 2010, p.208-10) require investigation if the contribution of constructivism (however conceived) to the discipline is to be understood.

2. Central Themes

This section aims to elucidate the central themes of constructivism. As noted, 'constructivism' is a label that cannot be applied unproblematically. Nonetheless, core aspects can be identified and subjected to exposition. Herein, the concepts of intersubjectivity, identity/interest, beliefs, norms, and agency are investigated.

First and foremost, constructivism is characterised by its emphasis on the social, intersubjective elements of world politics- constituting a challenge to realist emphasis on rational actors/material constraints, and liberal focus on institutional constraints (e.g. Griffiths, O'Callaghan, & Roach 2007, p.51.) Ideas are neither given, stable, nor predetermined, and the anarchic states system is not natural/transhistorical (e.g. Weber 2001, p.60.) The constructivist focus on the intersubjective/ideational discounts natural laws within social science, and posits that in terms of significance, the ideational *subsumes* the material insofar as any importance/significance attached to it is fundamentally socially constructed (Jackson & Sorenson 2010, p.213.) Thus, Wendt's account of United States threat attribution to the 500 and 5 nuclear warheads held by the United Kingdom and the DPRK respectively (Wendt 1995, p.73); a state of affairs fully explicable in ideational rather than (merely) material terms. The centrality of intersubjectivity in constructivism flows from the assertion that the intersubjective is more than the sum total of individuals' beliefs, but rather holds independent value as constituted in the social realm as structures (e.g. Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.281-2.) Intersubjectivity in Wendt, for example, highlights (primarily) the construction of identities and interests at the system level (Wendt 1995, p.138.) Another key application of intersubjectivity resides in attempts to account for the transition from a comparatively robust intersubjective consensus on state sovereignty to a world of international relations where that sovereignty is being continuously eroded, occasioned by the emergence of new intersubjective consensus- especially those surrounding human rights, genocide prohibi-

tion, and transnationalism (e.g. Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.282-4; Bradley-Phillips 2007, p.64-7.) Intersubjectivity, applied variously, is essentially a route to forming meaningful understanding of change, action, and behaviour (Hopf 1998, p.173.)

Constructivists employ the notion of identities, depicted as socially constituted and logically prior to interests, inheriting sociological constructivists' insights highlighting the social processes underpinning individual identities (Berger & Luckmann 1991, p.94), and applying them to international relations (Agius 2010, p.91; Reus-Smit 2013, p.218-20.) Interests are pursued by virtue of certain (logically prior) identities (e.g. Agius 2010, p.90-1; Wendt 1994, p.385-6), where meaning is determined *through* action (i.e. socially constructed) (Fierke & Jorgenson 2001, p.117.) Intersubjective in character, this process is the basis of constructivist accounts of political identity construction through shared assumptions/interpretations that attain meaning collectively (Adler 1997, p.323-5.) A major feature of the constructivist agenda is how this conceptualization of identity differs starkly from rationalist causal accounts that largely ignore diversity of agency/identity (Agius 2010, p.90-1), a feature perhaps most prominently/notoriously visible in Waltz's structural realism (Waltz, 1979), where states-as-like-units are treated transhistorically.

Constructivists' complex account of identity allows appreciation of exogenous/endogenous influences (e.g. Wendt 1994, p.384; Ruggie 1998, p.879) allowing, for example, Wendt to establish a radically more complex taxonomy of identity, including corporate, type, role, and collective (Wendt 1994, p.385; Agius 2010, p.92.) Constructivists then, advance a social ontology where any 'unit' is incomprehensible except in terms of social construction/embedded nature, and the individualist/rationalist ontology is subverted; units display a 'logic of appropriateness' (March & Olson, 1989) whereby 'rationality' is a function of (socially determined) legitimacy (Fierke 2010, p.190.) Thereby, constructivist accounts of 'interest' supplant mainstream rationalist approaches (especially the prolific realist conception of 'national interest') with complex and socially-sensitive accounts (e.g. Finnemore 1996; Weldes 1999) of international relations that move beyond (often obviously explanatorily impotent) material explanations (Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.290-291.)

Beliefs are key components of the process by which identity emerges, are social rules in the form of shared understandings of the world, and primarily expressed as truth claims (Fredreking 2003, p.364-5.) The role of this shared knowledge in identity is crucial for constructivists, being utilised to account for agent understanding about, and response to the world (Agius 2010, p.92.) This dynamic conception of shared principles underpins, for example, constructivist narrative on constitutive rules, where the utility of conceptions of structure-as-social-relationship can be brought to bear in explaining the emergence of features of the international realm. Ruggie's account of the evolution of the constitutive rules that brought the states

system into being (Ruggie 1998, p.25-26) serves to highlight both the explanatory efficacy of this approach, and the stark contrast in epistemological depth when compared with rationalist accounts (especially structural realism) (Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.286-7.) Importantly, the description of social object as constituted through participation/beliefs, and as a collective, self-referencing pattern (Bloor 1997, p.33) is the 'final' account; constructivists locate meaning precisely in the participation/constitution, prohibiting any materialist epistemological project aimed at 'getting behind' this (e.g. Palan 2000, p.582.) This focus on collective knowledge has allowed deeper appreciation of 'culture' in constructivist accounts, where extrapolated patterns of historically transmitted, symbolically embedded social perpetuations are described in terms of shared attitudes/knowledge (e.g. Geertz 1973, p.89.) Again, although diffusely applied, what constructivists share in this regard is an ontological commitment to placing people in definitive social contexts/processes where identities and interests are explicable in terms of their constitution, not merely statically (Finnemore & Sikkink 2001, p.394.) In his work on security culture, for example, Katzenstein attempts to take advantage of the explanatory efficacy of this approach, with culture exposed as having evaluative/cognitive standards that have definitional impact on both the members and nature of a system, at the heart of the realist basis of security (Katzenstein 1996, esp. p.4-7.)

Norms have been a key area of research for constructivists (e.g. Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.286), are broadly understood within constructivism to be the principle causes of change (Palan 2000, p.577) and are seen as having either constitutive (i.e. defining actor identity through specifying role actions) or regulative operation (i.e. specifying proper standards for and perpetuating established identities) (Shannon 200, p.293-297.) Normative structures play a key role in shaping of social identities such as political actors (Reus-Smidt 2005, p.196.) The reintroduction of norms in terms of the domestic processes/social understandings that the constructivist approach facilitates (e.g. Checkel 1997; 1998) has provided for a valuable intersection between International Relations and Comparative Politics (Finnemore & Sikkink 2001, p.397.) Again, this more nuanced account of state difference (as opposed to the 'like-units' minimalist/realist approach) has allowed constructivists to elucidate how, for example, domestic regime type and other domestic-level (i.e. extra-material) factors affect compliance with international human rights norms (Risse et al 1990; Chekel 2001; Gurowitz 1999), albeit with results that are less homogenous than the shared assumptions held therein (Finnemore & Siddink 2001, p.397-8.) Another aspect of a focus on norms within International Relations that has been stimulated by the constructivist agenda has been discussion surrounding the relative importance of (often conflictual and/or incompatible) international norms, and the waxing/waning of particular norms (especially sovereignty) (Risse 2000, p.4-6.) Such

narrative has been fuelled in part by the constructivist challenge to realist conceptions of ideas as rationalizations masking underlying material motivations of national interest/power seeking, noting that an account of the emergence and constitution of norms reveals that rationalizations derive their meaning/power from a moral force that is only explicable in terms of that emergence/constitution (Reus-Smit 2013, p.226.)

The key aspect of agency in constructivism is that no unit of analysis is privileged; states, individuals and non-state entities are all subject to analysis (e.g. Barnett & Finnemore 1991, p.699-704.) Thus, not only is constructivism offering a deeply complex and inclusive account of structure, but also allowing for a much broader range of objects/constituents of that structure (Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.287.) Moreover, agents and structures are understood to be involved in an ongoing process of mutual constitution; even where difficult, agents hold the ability to change structures through modifying replications of co-constitutions (Copeland 2006, p.190.) The main (but not only) constructivist insight for the field of International Relations implied therein is that (any specific set of conditions within) international anarchy is not inevitable or immutable. This is the central claim in Wendt's critique of structural realism (Wendt, 1992), and many constructivists have sought to utilise various explanatory tools to challenge the state-centric, static, rational egoistic approach of mainstream International Relations (Fierke 2010, p.190-191.)

3. Constructivism as Theory: Wendt

This section seeks to demonstrate the contribution of the central themes of constructivism insofar as they have been applied in a holistic, metatheoretical sense in the work of Wendt (Wendt 1987; 1992; 1994; 1995; 1999; 2006.) Although Onuf (Onuf, 1989) introduced constructivism to the field of International Relations, it is perhaps Wendt who has most notably, borrowing from Blumer's symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), provided the discipline with a comprehensive (evolving) 'theory' in the traditional, 'third image' sense (Jackson & Sorenson 2012, p.215.) Wendt can be seen as delivering his theory in direct opposition to, and engagement, with the dominant neorealist position (esp. Waltz, 1979), arguing that anarchy in the states system need not necessitate Waltzian, zero-sum 'self-help' policy (e.g. Jackson & Sorenson 2012, p.215.) Wendt identifies Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian 'cultures of anarchy' (Wendt 199, p.257) that represent international relations as wholly adversarial, competitive but incubating an ultimate right to exist, and mutually congenial/supportive respectively (Wendt 1999, p.299), and internalized to different extents by states (Wendt 1999, p.254; Jackson & Sorenson 2012, p.216-7.) From this initial claim about self-help/anarchy, Wendt has developed a philosophical

/interpretative approach to International Relations that builds around the basic constructivist tenets (outlined in the previous section) of social ontology (e.g. Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.293-4.) The relationship between the material and ideational factors is a central feature of his contribution, with his most recent contribution attempting to apply an analogy between wave/particle duality in quantum/subatomic physics (e.g. Gerry & Bruno, 2010), positing the possibility of a 'quantum' material/ideational composite in the social sciences (Wendt 2006, p.183-4; Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.295.) Focusing on consciousness as the seat of the social, and point of ideational/material convergence (Wendt 2006, p.184), he seeks to re-introduce the complexity of subjectivity that has been excluded by rationalist approaches (in his view, at least), with this 'quantum consciousness' allowing for the participatory epistemology characteristic of constructivism, and outlined in the previous section. Engaging with Giddens' structuration theory (e.g. Giddens, 1984), he offers International Relations a solution to the agent-structure dilemma that seeks to offer equal ontological status to both components (Zehfuss 2002, p.12-13), and (crucially) brings social practice into the forefront of discussion, specifically with the aim of subverting Waltzian conceptions of transhistorical structures, through highlighting the demonstrably intersubjective nature of identity/interest acquisition (Wendt 1995, p.396-403; 1994 p.385.) Wendt's contribution to International Relations then is primarily one of meta-theoretical character- as Wendt acknowledges (Wendt 1991, p.383), and while it is occasionally characterised as a 'thin' or 'holistic' constructivism, seeking to 'bridge the gap' between rationalist and constructivist positions (e.g. Griffiths, Roach, & Solomon 2009, p.158), he is certainly unique in applying the central themes of constructivism in a markedly systemic fashion (Reus-Smidt 2013, p.227.) Thus, in specifically targeting Waltzian accounts of structures by showing both their socially constitutive character, and role in determining not only behaviour, but also identities (e.g. Kratchovil 2000, p.83) Wendt is bringing the constructivist conceptual armoury into the heart of mainstream International Relations in a 'common sense' manner (Weber 2010, p.62.) This move paved the way for constructivism to seriously impact International Relations in the 1990's and early 2000's (Walt 1998, p.29-34.) Together with his acceptance of many key neorealist/rationalist tenets/methodologies, this allowed constructivist concepts to gain a measure of credibility/traction (e.g. Agius 2012, p.97); such features also help explain why his approach had significantly more impact on International Relations than Onuf's (Onuf, 1989) arguably equally theoretical prior attempt (Zehfuss 2002, p.11; Keohane 2000, p.125) As will be seen later, his work, while historiographically significant (e.g. Alker 2000, p.140-2; Smith 2000, p.151-2), has been subject to widespread criticism.

4. Constructivism as *Contra* Rationalism & ‘Middle Ground’

Constructivism can be seen as rooted in the 1980’s critical theorists-rationalists debate (Bradley-Phillips 2007, p.60-61) where the former (broadly) saw the latter as propagating a narrow, status quo-enforcing agenda (e.g. Ashley 1984) that invited supplementation or supplantation with a genuinely critical and therefore potentially emancipatory program (e.g. Ashley 1988; Cox 1981.) The end of the Cold War was a critical factor in constructivism’s emergence, since it (perhaps ironically) undermined *both* rationalism and critical theory, due to the former’s failure to account for large-scale change and the latter’s overemphasis on the role of International Relations in sustaining patterns of dominance in international relations (Bradley Phillips 2007, p.62; Price & Reus-Smit 1998.) Constructivists challenged rationalist precepts by effectively subsuming material factors into ideational factors through employing the concept of intersubjectivity, a process through which all (including material) social significance is constituted (e.g. Finnemore & Siddink 2001), undermining rationalist abstraction of the unit from the environment in which it emerges and reciprocally constitutes. The constructivist account of identity-formation, and especially the narrative on domestically formed legitimacies, proclaims a ‘logic of appropriateness’ that dually conflicts with rationalist conceptions of rationally, self-interested actors, and third-image accounts that ‘black-box’ state units (e.g. Finnemore 1996; Baldwin 1993; Bradley-Phillips 2007, p.63.) Ontological and epistemological differences have led to methodological variance, also (Bradley-Phillips 2007, p.63.) Despite the metatheoretical contributions (see above), the bulk of constructivist work has been empirical, seeking to investigate areas that were simply ignored by the neo-realist and neo-liberal agenda (Reus-Smit 2013, p.222-223.) At a time when rationalist methodology was highly quantitative, constructivism has been characterised by variance in approach and subject-matter.

When understanding the impact of the central themes of constructivism on International Relations within the historical context, it is important to understand also the differences within the constructivist ‘school.’ ‘Critical’ or ‘postmodern’ constructivist approaches, distinguishable most readily by their scepticism surrounding the scope for compatibility/engagement with the rationalist ‘mainstream’ of International Relations, undertake the critical theorists’ project of critiquing existent power structures (employing the constructivist toolbox) (Hopf 1998, p.183), especially uncovering the sociolinguistic emergence of dominant practices emerging from the power/knowledge nexus (and what is excluded therein) (Bradley-Phillips 2007, p.64.) Although a sceptical epistemological outlook prohibits broad theoretical generalizations, it is widely accepted that this group has undertaken a wide ranging (in terms of subject matter and methodology) (for example work ranging from geneal-

ogy of the concept of 'sovereignty' to deconstruction in Bosnian contexts) (Bartelson 1995; Campbell 1998) body of work that has enriched International Relations as a discipline (Finnemore & Sikkink 2001, p.394; Bradey-Phillips 2007, p.64.)

Despite the valuable variety/depth offered by the critical constructivist agenda, it is arguably in the 'conventional' constructivist work that the central themes of constructivism have had the greatest impact on International Relations. Where constructivists have worked under the assumption that there is no insurmountable/fundamental epistemological/methodological difference between constructivism and rationalism (e.g. Wendt 1998, p.116; Katzenstein, Keohane, & Krasner 1998, p.675; Fierke 2013, p.193), the benefits of legitimacy deriving from accepting positivist epistemology (Fierke 2013, p.193) and those arriving from the potential for debate where fundamental shared principles are established, have allowed constructivism to have a massive impact in the discipline of International Relations through the 'debate' with rationalism (Katzenstein, Keohane & Krasner 1998, p.683; Fierke 2013, p.193), where the focus on the ontological aspects of constructivist approaches has been deemed by some to be a self-conscious effort to engage directly with the International Relations mainstream and overcome scepticism/misunderstanding about the central aspects of constructivism harboured therein (Hopf 1998, p.117.) Indeed, in the early part of the 1990's-2000's period where constructivism is seen as having the greatest impact, the greatest obstacles to constructivism making an impact in International Relations were misunderstanding about the (supposedly) comprehensive antipositivist nature of constructivism and tensions within constructivism about the potential to engage with mainstream/rationalist positions on their own terms (Hopf 1998, p.117-118.) Since the conventional constructivist agenda offered clarification on both counts, it can be seen as applying the tenets of constructivism within the core of mainstream International Relations (which of course is precisely the objection raised by critical constructivist approaches) and in doing so having a profound effect. This effect has been to question the nature of social science itself (Fierke 2013, p.193), and advance a social rather than 'natural' account of international relations (Adler 1997, p.320.) Constructivists working in this vein can be understood as wishing to compensate for an endemic undersocialization of International Relations that has been exacerbated by the post-war rise of the realist and then neorealist paradigms (Wiener 2003, p.256), offering nuanced explanations of phenomena both within and beyond the 'traditional' agenda of those paradigms (Adler 1997, p.334-5; Fierke 2013, p.192

Constructivism cannot be conceived as a genuinely paradigmatic 'theory', and is often instead labelled an 'approach' (e.g Brown & Ainley 2005, p.48-49.) Nonetheless, constructivism had taken root in International Relations textbooks as the 'third theory' (e.g. Hughes 2000; Kegley & Wittkopf, 2001) by the turn of the 21st

century (Barkin 2000, p.325.) As seen in the preceding discussion, insofar as constructivists can be homogenised, they share certain core assumptions that are ontological/epistemological/methodological in nature. Nonetheless, the impact of constructivism in International Relations is clear when considering the extent to which the rationalist-constructivist ‘debate’ was acknowledged within the discipline (Katzenstein, Keohane, & Krasner 1998; Ruggie 1998 a.) The critique of/engagement with the dominant materialist/rationalist strands of 1980’s International Relations undertaken by constructivism, and the resulting reintroduction of social, historical, and normative assessment into the mainstream of the discipline (Reus-Smit 2013, p.232), must be considered the greatest contribution of constructivism to date. Such a move has allowed, for example, Kratochvil (e.g. Kratochvil 1984; 1988) through highlighting the epistemological poverty of mainstream International Relations (at the time) (Kratochvil 1984, p.305) and elucidation of the role of rules/norms in political life (Zehfuss 2002, p.15), to employ a much wider concept of ‘what counts’ as the proper subject of International Relations, and utilise a perhaps previously unthinkable linguistically-focused approach to critique mainstream neorealism in (broadly) its own terms (Kratochvil 1993, p.75.) However, as will be seen in the next section, the utility of constructivist epistemological approaches that borrow heavily from the ‘linguistic turn’ works of Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1958) must be balanced against questions arising from the attempt to reconcile the central themes of constructivism (which constitute, as has been seen, a social ontology) with a positivist epistemology (Fierke 2013, p.194; Fierke & Jorgenson, 2001.)

5. Criticism

The range and breadth of constructivist impact in International Relations has invited equally diverse objections. Whilst initially (especially) neoliberal critics noted the absence of a concrete constructivist research agenda (Keohane 1988, p.379-80), recent years has seen a proliferation of constructivist work that broadly allays such concerns through an agenda that tackles topics ranging from the slave trade and election monitoring to NATO transformation and decolonization (Keene 2007; Kelley 2008; Adler 2008; Crawford 2002.) In terms of empirical studies, application of the central themes of constructivism in recent years has seen the studies focusing on power (e.g. Wendt 1999; Barnett & Duvall 2004), culture (e.g. Katzenstein 2010, 2012; Hurd 2004, 2008), and investigations of the boundaries of moral possibility (Price, 2008) have shown that the impact of constructivism in International Relations has allowed the discipline as a whole to approach new and more complex issues, reaping the rewards of nuanced, case-specific insights and unravelling complex moral dilemmas (Reus-Smit 2007, p.238.)

More polar neorealist criticism suggested that earlier constructivist critique of rationalist positions were conspicuously lacking in descriptions of mechanisms that could facilitate peace in the states system, empirical support for the claims made about neorealist models, and convincing explanations of the rise and fall of specific discourses (Mearsheimer 1994; Viotti & Kaupi 2012, p.299.) So, while the commentary here has cited the constructivist engagement with rationalism as a key step in allowing the central themes to impact International Relations, this assessment must be tempered by the response. Thus, while Wendt makes a crucial contribution to International Relations through subsumption of the material to the ideational, raising the bar in International Relations in terms of complexity/quality of systemic theorizing through unprecedented depth in treatment of the state-as-actor, and (crucially) offering a markedly direct and robust challenge to the dominant neorealist paradigm (Copeland 2000, p.196-199), his theory has been subject to widespread criticism. The absence of a convincing account of identity formation (Kowert 2001, p.161-5), the issue of whether ‘cultures of anarchy’ as three, apparently modal states is a sustainable observation (Agius 2013, p.100), the absence of a critique of the realist conception of uncertainty (which of course cuts to the core of the potential for cooperation and the security dilemma) (Copeland, 2006), and the challenge that constructivism has yet to provide a comprehensive account of both what norms are and how they function (especially when they appear to be in conflict (Jervis 1998, p.976)) (Krasner 2000; Farrell 2002, p.60-1; Agius 2013, p.100-1) form the main points on neorealist-constructivist contention. Additionally, as constructivism has proliferated and embedded itself within International Relations as a ‘major player’, even deeper concerns about the central move of subsumption of the material to the ideational have led some to charge that the attribution of causal properties to ideational factors contradicts the essentially dialogical nature of intersubjectivity (Campbell 1998, p.218-23; Agius 2013, p.100.) So, while the coming to grips with neorealism on its own terms has been seen to have lent constructivist tenets legitimacy, others charge that this amounts to a mere reformulation of neorealism in ideational terms (Weber 1999, p.439-440; Agius 2013.)

6. Conclusion

This paper has detailed the main tenets of constructivism, insofar as it can be characterised homogenously, and shown that they have profoundly impacted the field of International Relations. While, agreeing with Zehfuss, it is problematic to characterise the precise nature of key constructivist claims unequivocally (Zehfuss 2002, p.2), the overall impact of constructivism on International Relations has been established. Empirically, constructivist approaches have undertaken nuanced studies

both within and beyond the ‘traditional’ scope of International Relations. However, perhaps most crucially, working at the metatheoretical level, in both direct opposition to and in conjunction with the dominant neoliberal/neorealist strands of International Relations has facilitated an invaluable reintroduction of the social to the discipline, and played a large part in the rebalancing against quantitative methodologies to ensure that the historical and normative are not overlooked. Understood within a wider disciplinary disposition to recount historiography in terms of pedagogically-convenient, but as has been seen, not always fully encompassing/accurate, ‘paradigms’, this paper reveals that international relations must be wary of dealing with the ‘schools’ as homogenous entities.

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